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***Robotic Relationships: Love Behind Glass Lenses***

No matter how much someone might like to say otherwise, emotional relationships are tough. They need strong effort from both sides in order to thrive and that same level of effort *must* include two main things: physical and emotional connections. What would a relationship be without those two things? Is it imaginable to have those same connections with an inanimate object, specifically a robot? These questions are important to consider when looking at the idea of human/robot relationships and why they happen. From authors Sherry Turkle and Glenda Shaw-Garlock to *Blade Runner,* the cult-classic 1982 dystopian film directed by Ridley Scott, common subtopics and opinions are found in each of them concerning the reasons human/robot relationships are formed. Such reasons are cultural influences, circumstantial influences, or material influences, such as the desire to replace human frailty.

*Blade Runner* is set in 2019 Los Angeles, but it is not the same Los Angeles that most people would think of. There is a very large Japanese influence on the setting for this particular film. The billboards and electronic signs on skyscrapers show Japanese women in traditional dress advertising foods and accessories native to Japanese culture. But on the sign right next to it, is a classic *Coca-Cola* advertisement written in English. Because of this, the audience viewing the film can see that just because a vast majority of the setting is influenced by Japanese culture, it is still Los Angeles, California, where English is the primary language. So why did Ridley include this influence to begin with? Since *Blade Runner* focuses on robots wanting to become human, Scott allowed outside influence from a culture that both accepted human/robot relationships and placed them on a very high pedestal: the Japanese.

Glenda Shaw-Garlock agrees with Ridley and adds input concerning the high level of acceptance the Japanese have for human/robotic relationships in her article, “Looking Forward to Sociable Robots.” Garlock writes on page 346, “The history of the humanoid robot in Japan can be traced back to the Edo Period (1600-1867).” The earliest form of robotics in Japanese culture was a *karakuri* (a ‘trick’ or ‘gadget’) in the shape of a little boy that helped serve customers green tea (Shaw-Garlock 346). Because of the hospitable and kind nature of the robot, the Japanese have since continued to maintain a strong emotional relationship between robots and humans (Shaw-Garlock 346).

In Sherry Turkle’s article, “Alone Together: The Robotic Movement,” she addresses the idea that some human/robot relationships are formed due to the circumstances in which they occur. For example, Turkle writes about Miriam, an elderly woman living in a Boston nursing home (Turkle 326). Miriam’s son had recently ended his relationship with her and because of that, Miriam now sits in her room stroking Paro, a “sociable robot in the shape of a baby seal (Turkle 326).” It is a “therapeutic robot” and researched had shown that it has positive effects on the “ill, elderly, and emotionally troubled (Turkle 326).” It can make eye contact, responds accordingly to human touch, and has a working vocabulary for making better connections with its owner (Turkle 326). Miriam strokes the robot and, since on this particular day she is sad, tells the robot that it, too, is sad while Paro purrs in agreement (Turkle 327). According to Turkle, Miriam shows affection for the robot in an attempt to make herself feel better about the relationship she has with her son (Turkle 327). Turkle believes that if these particular circumstances surrounding the relationship between Miriam and her son had never occurred, then Miriam would have no need for Paro. But it is because of those circumstances that Paro comes into play and Miriam begins to heal. The plot of *Blade Runner* agrees with Turkle and contributes circumstantial evidence as well.

Rick Deckard, the main character played by actor Harrison Ford, is a retired police officer who used to be in charge of tracking down illegal robots, or “replicants,” and killing them (or “retiring” them, as the film puts it). In the beginning of the film, Deckard is brought out of retirement and assigned four illegal replicants to terminate. One of those replicants in an experimental robot named Rachael. Rachael has had memories implanted in her to give her a more human-like personality. Because she is more human-like than the other three assigned to him, Deckard begins to feel deeply for Rachael, even to the point where he begins a physical relationship with her. Rachael being more human-like than the others and Deckard not even wanting to come out of retirement in the first place are all circumstances found in *Blade Runner* that cause Rachael and Deckard to have a physical and emotional relationship.

According to Turkle concerning material reasons why human/robot relationships exist, “when people talk about relationships with robots, they talk about cheating husbands, wives who fake orgasms, and children who take drugs (Turkle 327).” In addition to Turkle’s previous statement, she goes on to include quotes from various individuals she interviewed about the subject. “A thirty-year-old man remarks, ‘I’d rather talk to a robot. Friends can be exhausting. The robot will always be there for me. And whenever I’m done, I can walk away (Turkle 327).’” Another individual, Anne, a young graduate student, told Turkle that she would “trade in her boyfriend ‘for a sophisticated Japanese robot’ if the robot would produce what she called ‘caring behavior (Turkle 326).’” Because Anne doesn’t want to be alone in her house, the robot would provide an atmosphere of civility in the household while she, in turn, would provide the illusion that someone is really there with her (Turkle 326). The same situation applies to Miriam’s case—with Paro and her son. Miriam is hurt by her son’s dismissal so she turns to Palo instead. Palo gives Miriam the feeling that someone cares about her by purring and making eye contact while Miriam, in order to heal emotionally, provides the illusion that Palo is real. Shaw-Garlock agrees with Turkle and elaborates on human frailty concerning sexuality and the element of family.

In late seventeenth century Japan, erotic love dolls, or ‘Dutch Wives,’ were first introduced to the culture by Dutch merchant ships (Shaw-Garlock 346). Shaw-Garlock interviewed Hideo Tsuchiya, president of Orient Industries, “the leading manufacturer of love dolls in Japan,” and he stated that love dolls are not just a doll or simply an inanimate object (Shaw-Garlock 346). They have the potential to be “irreplaceable lovers” that can potentially “provide a sense of emotional healing.” “Today, discarded dolls are even afforded respectful funeral rites (Shaw-Garlock 346).” Concerning the family, Shaw-Garlock notes “humanoid social robots are conceived and marketed ‘as adopted members of a household (Shaw-Garlock 347).’” Japanese suffixes for boys and girls also apply to these particular robots which in turn expresses a sense of “endearment, intimateness, sweetness, and child-like” personality (Shaw-Garlock 347).

From the life-size, fully-active humanoid robots found in Ridley Scott’s classic *Blade Runner* to the infant-size baby seal “therapeutic robot” examined by Turkle, it is clear that there are a variety of robots out there and all of them are more than capable of forming emotional relationships with their human companions, but it is the reasons for those relationships that make them so interesting to others and meaningful to those involved. Whether those reasons are cultural, circumstantial, or material, human/robot relationships have survived centuries and will continue to survive throughout the upcoming centuries.

**Works Cited**

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